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SUBJECT: IRAQI POLITICS: SHIFTING ALLIANCES AND THE  
EMERGENCE OF ISSUE-BASED COALITIONS

Classified By: PMIN Robert Ford, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The grueling Iraqi political debates that eventually yielded consensus on the provincial elections law and the ratification of the Status of Forces Agreement pointed to an evolution in Iraqi politics in late 2008 as opposed to the way they worked in 2004-06. The contrasts are generally positive. For example, power blocs have become more fluid, as the Kurdish-Shia Islamist alliance that was at the center of the Iraqi political alignment now shows signs of fraying. Meanwhile, the Sunni Arab bloc, never monolithic, also shows signs of deeper internal divisions. At the same time, old rivals now show greater willingness to work together, most notably Dawa Shia Islamists with the Sunni Arabs. There are also indications that issue-based politics are emerging as a counterpoint to the sectarian formulas that prevailed in the first years of post-Saddam Iraq. Even on a human level we see a certain ease of discourse and conversation utterly absent in 2004-2006.

¶2. (C) Summary Continued: The U.S. still plays a vital role, as we can help set the agenda and we can help define the issues to be decided. We did both in the summer 2008 provincial election law debate and the recent debate about the SoFA. However, we have less influence than in 2004 - 2006, and will have even less influence as Iraqi politicians more and more can work together without our hovering over them. We also should not overstate the progress the Iraqi political actors have made. Distrust among Iraq's competing political groupings remains high, resulting in a political process which is functionally challenged, at best. There is no common vision of the Iraqi state - or even of Iraqi society - that binds Iraqi political leaders together. That said, four years into the Iraqi political experiment there are also signs that the Iraqi political system is developing in some positive ways. End summary.

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Traditional Shi'a-Kurdish Alliance Fraying  
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¶3. (C) This summer and fall, it became clear that Iraq's grand political alliance among Shi'a and Kurdish parties that has characterized post-Saddam Iraqi politics was beginning to fray. Debate over the elections law stalled for months over the question of Kirkuk, leading the (autonomous) Kirkuk Provincial Assembly to provocatively threaten to join the Kurdistan Regional Government, while Arab nationalists vowed that Kirkuk was inseparable from a unified Iraq. Hard-line Sunni Arab nationalists forged an unlikely alliance with Prime Minister Maliki's Da'wa party, Sadrist and the Fadhila party to derail a Kurdish-ISCI backed draft provincial election law and extract Kurdish concessions on near-term power sharing in the disputed province. Iraqi Army maneuvers in Diyala province almost led to an open clash with Kurdish forces near the city of Khanaqin in August, highlighting the divide between Iraqi Kurds and Arabs on the national political stage and across the breadth of northern Iraq.

14. (C) In the November SoFA debates, the passage of a non-binding resolution calling for political reforms, initially demanded by the Sunni Arabs quickly earned backing from President Talabani and other Kurds who ensured there was language about respecting both local and regional governments as well as the authorities of the federal government. More recently, the Kurdish Regional Government issued a statement December 1 slamming the Prime Minister for violating the Constitution, overcentralizing power and insisting that the KRG was right, and Maliki wrong, in the debate over division of authorities in the oil sector.

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Shi'a vs. Shi'a  
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15. (C) As Sunni and some of the Shi'a Arabs lined up against Kurds over Kirkuk during the elections law debate, both Sunni and Shi'a political groupings have experienced their own serious internal fractures. Among the Shi'a, the strains between Maliki's Da'wa party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) have been most apparent over the Prime Minister's establishment of Tribal Support Councils, viewed suspiciously by ISCI as tools for Maliki to peel away their constituents (septel). ISCI also is strongly in favor of decentralization and resistant to Maliki's efforts to reassert the supremacy of central authority.

16. (C) Maliki also found he could not count on fellow Shi'a politicians as he sought to build domestic support for a SoFA with the U.S. The Sadrists, who hold about 10 percent of

BAGHDAD 00003789 002 OF 004

parliamentary seats, were consistently shrill in opposition to the SoFA. The (Shi'a) Fadhila Party, which broke away from ISCI and Da'wa's United Iraqi Alliance coalition bloc in 2007, also lined up with the secularist Iraqiya and Sunnis in resisting the SoFA on the grounds that Maliki would exploit the deal to consolidate his own power. (In the end, ISCI and Iraqiya voted with most Sunnis in support of the SoFA, and Fadhila abstained.) Maliki aides also told us ISCI also rebuffed Da'wa's initial overtures seeking support for the agreement. ISCI eventually did come on board to support the SoFA. However, in the negotiations over the non-binding political reform resolution passed November 28 along with the SoFA, ISCI sometimes sided with the Kurds against the Da'wa party stance, according to Adel Abdel Mehdi and Barham Saleh in private conversations with the Ambassador. ISCI's support for Maliki if there is a vote of no-confidence in the Prime Minister cannot be taken for certain.

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Sunni vs. Sunni  
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17. (C) Debates over the election law and the SoFA also highlighted major changes on the Sunni political landscape. The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), once the preeminent political force in Sunni politics, has seen its influence increasingly diluted and undermined by rivals on several fronts. While political logic would seem to suggest Sunni Arab support for the SoFA, the IIP and other Sunnis in fact proved extremely wary of openly expressing support, fearing they would be branded traitors or collaborators by rival Sunnis. Later, IIP and other Sunnis admitted their continued foot-dragging was principally motivated by a desire to maximize a fleeting moment of political leverage to extract concessions from Maliki on their broader grievances.

18. (C) Parliament Speaker Mashadani of the (rival Sunni) National Dialogue Council, rather than Vice President Hashemi (of the IIP), was a principal broker of the deal that ultimately delivered Sunni votes for the SoFA - linking it to a resolution outlining the opposition's unified demands of

the Maliki government (septel). (Observers note the resolution attracted 140 votes, two more than the 138 simple majority needed for a no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister, an event opposition insiders are projecting could happen after the provincial elections in early 2009.)

¶9. (C) Equally important to the Sunni political equation has been Sunni nationalist Saleh Mutlaq, who was the leader of the "July 22 bloc" which took a hard-line nationalist position on Kirkuk and forced through a controversial provincial law (later vetoed) despite a Kurdish walkout of parliament on July 22. Initially a staunch opponent of the SoFA, Mutlaq began to show greater flexibility on the question, linking his support to GOI reform of the de-baathification law, security detainees, compensation for war victims, and implementation of the Amnesty law. Though Mutlaq ultimately overplayed his hand and had to back down on de-baathification, he was unquestionably effective in leveraging a position for himself as a key Sunni power broker in the SoFA process.

¶10. (C) As Mashadani and Mutlaq have emerged as key leaders in Sunni political circles, Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi has seen his own political fortunes diminish. When we asked a Sunni member of parliament why a list of Sunni demands were presented to the Embassy and Prime Minister by Speaker Mashadani rather than VP Hashemi, the parliamentarian replied QMashadani rather than VP Hashemi, the parliamentarian replied that Hashemi had lost their trust. While Hashemi still retains influence as the leader of IIP, the SOFA debate has clearly demonstrated the emergence of competing power centers within the Sunni camp.

¶11. (C) Beyond the SoFA context, IIP contacts have admitted to us their party's anxiety about emerging Sunni tribal politicians, particularly among leaders of the Awakening Councils in Anbar province, Iraq's Sunni heartland. The Sahwa have been riding high following their expulsion of terrorists from the province, and are making the most of the material and implicit political benefits of their alliance with Coalition Forces. Emerging Sunni tribal politicians are expected to make a strong showing in the race against the IIP for provincial council seats in Anbar and elsewhere in the elections at the end of January. IIP contacts confirm this factor has fostered bitterness and some paranoia among the party's leadership toward the USG.

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Bitter Adversaries, Now Collegial  
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BAGHDAD 00003789 003 OF 004

¶12. (C) We have been struck, beyond the broader shifts among Iraqi political blocs, by the apparent evolution of attitudes of individual politicians toward each other. In the weeks building up to the SoFA vote, we spotted Sunni hardliner Hussein Falluji chatting amiably in the parliamentary corridors with Da'wa Party bloc leader Ali Al-Adib. We also noted Hassan Deghan, formerly tied to the Sunni insurgency, now shares a parliamentary office suite and interacts casually with Hadi al-Ameri, the nominal leader of the Iranian-founded Badr Organization. In a conversation in late November, Sunni politician Saleh al-Mutlaq told Pol MinCouns that while key Shi'a politician Jalaladdin Saghir "has a bad history" (his Baratha mosque was reputed to be a site where Sunni Arabs were killed in 2005 - 2006), he and Saghir nonetheless needed to get along. Mutlaq said he perceived that Saghir was willing to try and indeed Saghir has told us as much. Similarly, Prime Minister Maliki confidante and parliamentarian Hasan Sanayd told PMIN at the end of November that obviously Dawa had made mistakes and has to reach out to the Sunni Arabs; it was willing to discuss even sensitive issues like de-Baath and find workable changes. In closed-door political meetings at which we were invited, we have seen Sanayd's colleague in the Dawa party, Haidar

al-Abadi, sit amiably next to (the more dour) members of the Iraqi Islamic Party joking and exchanging stories. While they may go only so far in overcoming the deep divides among Iraq's political groupings, such indications of collegiality (or at least pragmatism) between Shia and Sunni Arabs were almost unknown in 2004 - 2006.

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U.S. Role Evolving, Diluted  
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¶13. (C) During the Iraqis' deliberations over the elections law, and particularly during the more recent wrangling over the SoFA, it is noteworthy that many of the key meetings and interactions took place strictly among Iraqis without an overt U.S. role. While the U.S. Mission lobbied constantly and monitored the process closely, the U.S. did not intervene, as it has in the past, in the parliamentary deliberations by organizing inter-Iraqi meetings or proposing specific compromises on the hotly debated political reform resolution or the final draft law ratifying the SoFA. In the end, the outcomes in both the election law and SoFA deliberations, however imperfect from a U.S. perspective, were distinctly Iraqi outcomes of distinctly Iraqi political processes.

¶14. (C) This is not to say that the U.S. has now been relegated to a marginal role. Through intensive lobbying, we can still mobilize Iraqi political leaders' attention to key issues and influence timely (by local standards) action. Had the U.S. (and UNAMI) not insisted that the Iraqi parliament pass an election law in the summer of 2008, very likely there would have been no law. (There was never great enthusiasm among the squabbling political bloc leaders.) Once the Sunni Arabs began to understand our warning that we would withdraw our forces without the legal cover of a SoFA, they focused much more on how to fashion an acceptable political deal so that they could vote to ratify the agreement. Our views on desired outcomes influence and shape Iraqi debates, but we can no longer dictate the exact shape of the outcomes. The provincial election law was passed two months later than we and UNAMI had wanted; the Iraqi political groups focused on their short-term interests, not our pressure. Similarly, Qon their short-term interests, not our pressure. Similarly, we argued against the idea of a referendum on the SoFA but the Iraqi Islamic Party insisted on it, and the referendum threatened the vital shrot-term interests of no other group in the Iraqi parliament.

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Comment  
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¶15. (C) Distrust among Iraq's competing political groupings remains high, resulting in a political process which is functionally challenged, at best. There is no common vision of the Iraqi state - or even of Iraqi society - that binds Iraqi political leaders together. Yet the debate over the Provincial Election Law and SOFA demonstrated the emergence, however tentative, of functional multi-party politics, and the alignment of political groups around issues such as federalism or the SOFA rather than strictly along sectarian and ethnic lines. It may not be pretty, and can result in unusual and generally temporary partnerships. The greater fluidity, and the signs of improved human relationships, are very slowly emerging developments that should be seen as a positive step in Iraq's long, painful political evolution. That said, Iraqi political actors have a remarkably short-term perspective of their interests and only now are we

BAGHDAD 00003789 004 OF 004

starting to hear parliamentarians talk about making concessions in order to build credibility and establish longer-term relationships. As Iraqis work better together, our influence will diminish gradually even as it remains important. We will have to pick and choose our battles more

carefully and recognize that we cannot script the results of major political debates as we usually could several years ago. End comment.

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